

# Ix. the Persecution

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

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*The sermon describes the persecution of Christians in Rome and the bravery of Marcellus, who risks his life to help his fellow Christians, and finds comfort in the promise of salvation.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 24:13, Matthew 24:44, John 15:13, John 16:33, Romans 8:18, Romans 8:35, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philippians 1:20, Hebrews 10:36, Revelation 12:11

**Topics:** "Christian Persecution", "Eternal Glory"

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## Description

In the sermon 'Ye have need of patience, that after ye have done the will of God ye might receive the promise,' the preacher recounts the intense persecution faced by Christians, where even the humblest followers were not spared. Despite the dire circumstances, there were still non-Christian individuals who sympathized with and assisted the persecuted Christians. The narrative follows Marcellus, a bold Christian who risks his life to help his brethren, showcasing unwavering faith and readiness to face death for his beliefs. The sermon emphasizes the need for Christians to be prepared to meet death at any moment, drawing strength from the promises of God's Word and finding solace in the hope of eternal glory.

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## Transcript

"Ye have need of patience, that after ye have done the will of God ye might receive the promise."

The persecution raged with greater fury. In the few weeks that passed since Marcellus had lived here, great numbers had sought refuge in this retreat. Never before had so many congregated here. Generally the authorities had been content with the more conspicuous Christians, and the fugitives to the Catacombs were consequently composed of this class; it was a severe persecution indeed which embraced all, and such indiscriminate rage had been shown only under a few emperors. But now there was no distinction of class or station. The humblest follower as well as the highest teacher was hurried away to death.

Until this time the communication with the city was comparatively easy, for the poor Christians above ground never neglected those below or forgot their wants. Provisions and assistance of all kinds were readily obtained. But now the very ones on whom the fugitives relied for help were themselves driven out, to share their fate and become the partakers instead of the bestowers of charity.

Still their situation was not desperate. There were many left in Rome who loved them and assisted them, although they were not Christians. In every great movement there will be an immense class composed of

neutrals, who either from interest or indifference remain unmoved. These people will invariably join the strongest side, and where danger threatens will evade it by any concessions. Such was the condition of large numbers in Rome. They had friends and relatives among the Christians whom they loved, and for whom they felt sympathy. They were always ready to assist them, but had too much regard for their own safety to cast in their lot with them. They attended the temples and assisted at the worship of the heathen gods as before, and were nominally adherents of the old superstition. Upon these now the Christians were forced to depend for the necessaries of life.

The expeditions to the city were now accompanied with greater danger, and only the boldest dared to venture. Such, however, was the contempt of danger and death with which they were inspired that there was never any scarcity of men for this perilous duty.

To this task Marcellus offered himself, glad that he could in any way do good to his brethren. His fearlessness and acuteness, which had formerly raised him so high as a soldier, now made him conspicuous for success in this new pursuit.

Numbers were destroyed every day. Their bodies were sought for and carried away by the Christians for purposes of burial. This was not very difficult to accomplish, since it relieved the authorities of the trouble of burning or burying the corpses.

One day tidings came to the community beneath the Appian Way that two of their number had been captured and put to death. Marcellus and another Christian went forth to obtain their bodies. The boy Pollio also went with them, to be useful in case of need. It was dusk when they entered the city gate, and darkness came rapidly on. Soon, however, the moon arose and illumined the scene.

#### The Coliseum

They threaded their way through the dark streets, and at length came to the Coliseum, the place of martyrdom for so many of their companions. Its dark form towered up grandly before them, vast and gloomy and stern as the imperial power that reared it. Crowds of keepers and guards and gladiators were within the iron gates, where the vaulted passage ways were illuminated with the glare of torches.

The keepers knew their errand, and rudely ordered them to follow. They led them on till they came to the arena. Here lay a number of bodies, the last of those who had been slain that day. They were fearfully mangled; some indeed were scarcely distinguishable as human beings. After a long search they found the two whom they sought. Their bodies were then placed in large sacks, in which they prepared to carry them away. Marcellus looked in upon the scene. All around him rose the massive walls, ascending by many terraces back to the outer circle. Its black form seemed to shut him in with a barrier which he could not pass.

"How long will it be," he thought, "before I too shall take my place here and lay down my life for my Saviour? When that time comes shall I be true? Lord Jesus, in that hour sustain me!"

The moon had not yet risen high enough to shine into the arena. Within it was dark and forbidding. The search had been made with torches obtained from the keepers.

At this moment Marcellus heard a deep voice from some of the vaults behind them. Its tones rang out upon the night air with startling distinctness, and were heard high above the rude clamor of the keepers:

"Now is come salvation and strength,  
And the kingdom of our God,  
And the power of his Christ;  
For the accuser of our brethren is cast down,  
Which accused them before our God day and night.  
And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb,  
And by the word of his testimony,  
And they loved not their lives unto the death."

"Who is that?" said Marcellus.

"Do not notice him," said his companion. "It is Brother Cinna. His griefs have made him mad. His only son was burned at the stake at the beginning of the persecution, and since then he has gone about the city denouncing woe. Hitherto they have let him alone; but now at last they have seized him."

"And is he a prisoner here?"

"He is."

Again the voice of Cinna arose, fearfully, menacingly, and terribly,

"How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not avenge our blood on them that dwell upon the earth?"

"This, then, is the man that I heard in the Capitol?"

"Yes. He has been all through the city, and even in the palace, uttering his cry."

"Let us go."

They took their sacks and started for the gates. After a short delay they were allowed to pass. As they went out they heard the voice of Cinna in the distance:

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen,

And is become the habitation of devils,

And the hold of every foul spirit,

And the cage of every unclean and hateful bird:

Come ye out of her, my people!"

None of them spoke until they had reached a safe distance from the Coliseum.

"I felt afraid," said Marcellus, "that we should be kept in there."

"Your fears were reasonable," said the other. "Any sudden whim of the keeper might be our doom. But this we must be prepared for. In times like this we must be ready to meet death at any moment. What says our Lord? 'Be ye also ready.' We must be able to say when the time comes, 'I am now ready to be offered.'"

"Yes," said Marcellus, "our Lord has told us what we will have: 'In this world ye shall have tribulation--'"

"And he says also, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. Where I am, there ye shall be also.'"

"Through him," said Marcellus, "we can come off more than conquerors over death. The afflictions of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed to us."

Thus they solaced themselves with the promises of that blessed Word of life which in all ages and under all circumstances can give such heavenly consolation. Bearing their burdens, they finally reached their destination in safety, thankful that they had been preserved.

A few days afterward Marcellus went up for provisions. This time he was alone. He went to the house of a man who was friendly to them and had been of much assistance. It was outside of the walls, in the suburb nearest the Appian Way.

After obtaining the requisite supply, he began to inquire after the news. "The news is bad for you," said the man. "One of the Pretorian officers was recently converted to Christianity, and the emperor is enraged. He has appointed another to the office which he held, and has sent him after the Christians. They are catching some every day. No man is too poor to be seized in these days."

"Ah! Do you know the name of this Pretorian officer who is seeking the Christians?"

"Lucullus."

"Lucullus!" cried Marcellus. "How strange!"

"He is said to be a man of great skill and energy."

"I have heard of him. This is indeed bad news for the Christians."

"The conversion of the other Pretorian officer has greatly enraged the emperor. A price is now set upon his head. If you chance to see him or to be in his way, friend, you had better let him know. They say he is in the Catacombs."

"He must be there. There is no other place of safety."

"These are indeed terrible times. You have need to be cautious."

"They cannot kill me more than once," said Marcellus.

"Ah! you Christians have wonderful fortitude. I admire your bravery; yet still I think you might conform outwardly to the emperor's decree. Why should you rush so madly upon death?"

"Our Redeemer died for us. We are ready to die for him. And since he died for his people, we also are willing to imitate him and lay down our lives for our brethren."

"You are wonderful people," said the man, raising his hands.

Marcellus now bade him farewell, and departed with his load. The news which he had just heard filled his mind.

"So Lucullus has taken my place," thought he. "I wonder if he has turned against me? Does he now think of me as his friend Marcellus, or only as a Christian? I may soon find out. It would be strange indeed if I should fall into his hands; and yet if I am captured it will probably be by him.

"Yet it is his duty as a soldier, and why should I complain? If he is appointed to that office he can do nothing else than obey. As a soldier he can only treat me as an enemy of the state. He may pity or love me in his heart, yet he must not shrink from his duty.

"If a price is put on my head they will redouble their efforts for me. My time I believe is at hand. Let me be prepared to meet it."

With such thoughts as these, he walked down the Appian Way. He was wrapped up in his own meditations, and did not see a crowd of people that had gathered at a corner of a street until he was among them. Then he suddenly found himself stopped.

"Ho, friend!" cried a rude voice, "not so fast. Who are you, and where are you going?"

"Away," cried Marcellus in a tone of command natural to one who had ruled over men; and he motioned the man aside.

The crowd were awe-struck by his authoritative tone and imperious manner, but their spokesman showed more courage.

"Tell us who you are, or you shall not pass."

"Fellow," cried Marcellus, "stand aside! Do you not know me? I am a Pretorian."

At that dreaded name the crowd quickly opened, and Marcellus passed through it. But scarcely had he moved five paces away than a voice exclaimed:

"Seize him! It is the Christian, Marcellus!"

A shout arose from the crowd. Marcellus needed no further warning. Dropping his load, he started off down a side street toward the Tiber. The whole crowd pursued. It was a race for life, and death. But Marcellus had been trained to every athletic sport, and increased the distance between himself and his pursuers. At last he reached the Tiber, and leaping in, he swam to the opposite side.

The pursuers reached the river's brink, but followed no further.

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